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AUTHOR Habicht, Manuela H.
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ABSTRACT

Individual symptoms of psychological disorders are often related to general familial conflicts; a psychologically conspicuous individual cannot become healthy as long as family life is deeply troubled. To explore this belief, parents' concepts about their children's behavior were examined. Forty-four parents, who were either involved with a family counseling center or a church-affiliated organization, filled out questionnaires. Out of the 32 behavior problems which the participants were asked to consider and rate, 15 were marked as being present by at least 45 percent of the parents. Results indicate that the parents see family problems and tensions between spouses as possible causes for the child's behavior problems. A change in thinking relating to holistic viewpoints appears to have broadened the understanding of problems and has favored system-related thinking. From this point of view, family members are seen as elements of a circle of interaction in which the behavior of one member necessarily influences the behavior of all the others. Therefore, an individual's behavior can no longer be seen one-dimensionally as the cause of the behavior of all others. This change of paradigm from the single cause and effect model to an ecological system thinking model is studied here. (RJM)

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Parental Explanations For Their Child`s Psychological Illness

Manuela H. Habicht, Ph.D.
KORCZAK-College
Germany

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INTRODUCTION

Individual symptoms of psychological disorders are often related to general familial conflicts, a psychologically conspicuous individual can not become healthy as long as family life is deeply troubled. The children of whom parents seek help from a family counselling center are at a higher risk in the family because of attempts at compensation on the part of the parents. The present work refers to the Neraal (1976) [1)] study in its essential points. There are differences between the present work and that of Neraal (1976). Our newly revised questionnaires only contain those items which proved to

be significant in the Giessen study (Neraal, 1976) in the sense of providing an adequate explanation for variation in the factor solutions. The first hypothesis is that the parent`s concept about their children`s behavior has not changed but that the parent`s concept about the origins of their children`s psychological, behavioral problems have changed in the last 17 years.

1) NEERAL, T. Krankheitstheorien und Behandlungserwartungen in Familien mit einem psychisch gestörten Kind. Unveröffentlichte Dissertation, Gießen, Germany: Justus-Liebig-Universität, 1976

METHOD

Fifty-five questionnaires were distributed to six family counseling centers and two church-affiliated organizations.
Seven agreed to support the study.
The evaluation of each statement occured on a five-point scale. The questionnaires were directed at parents who visit a family counselling center with their children.
The majority of parents (N=44) filled out the materials.
(37% of them were females and 63% of them were males)

RESULTS

Out of the 32 behavior problems which the participants were asked to consider and rate, 15 were marked as being present by at least 45 percent of the parents. Both the items "reticence" (1st place) and "rebelliousness" (2nd place) were marked as observed behaviors by more than 70 % of the parents (See Table 1). Of the 19 items to be considered in the cause questionnaire, ten were classified as being present by at least 47% of the parents (See Table 2).

It has been shown here that a child´s passive and withdrawn behavior (behavior FIII) can have different

causes, according to the parents. Parents assume that both family problems (cause FI) and real conditions (cause FII), such as illness and social circumstances can be the causes. Furthermore, parents attribute the child´s lack of activity to an unstable psychological constitution (cause FIV). Tensions between spouses and general family problems are given as causes for the child´s behavior problems, and thus signalize partial responsibility for the child´s problems.The child him-/herself is clearly made responsible (cause F III) for difficulties in achievement (behavior F II). In this cause attribution, the hidden assumption is that the child is the

only one responsible for the problems arising in the area of achievement.Parents who have already come to the conclusion that they feel a certain responsibility for the child´s problems often prove to be strongly motivated in a counselling situation to find out, with the help of the therapist, the causes of the child´s psychological problems. On the other hand, the relation between difficulties in achievement (behavior F II) and the negative characteristics of the child (cause F III) shows that the parents do not accept any part of the responsibility for the child´s problems; instead, they use the child as a "scapegoat".

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study prove that the parents see family problems and tensions between spouses as possible causes for the child´s behavior problems. It is no longer the child alone who is held responsible for his/her psychologically abnormal behavior. A change in thinking relating to holistic viewpoints which has slowly developed appears to have broadened the understanding of problems at the present time, and has thus favored system-related thinking. From this point of view, family members are seen as elements of a circle of interaction, in which the behavior of

one member necessarily influences the behavior of all the others. Thus, a certain individual behavior can no longer be seen one-dimensionally as the cause of the behavior of all others. Each member influences the others, and at the same time, is influenced by the others.

The change of paradigms from the single cause and effect psychology to the ecological system thinking is also seen in the present study.

TABLE 1
The 15 most Frequently Named Behavior Problems

Ranking	% of Vpn	Item number and name
1	70.6	(07) Reticence
2	70.5	(29) Rebelliousness
3	68.2	(27) Cannot occupy him/ herself
4	68.1	(03) Messiness
5	65.9	(15) Pleasure in Annoying Others
6	63.7	(20) Restlessness
7	63.6	(19) Separation anxieties
8	61.4	(10) Trouble in playing with others
9	59.1	(17) Poor Concentration
10	56.8	(16) Snacking
11	54.5	(13) Jealousy
12	54.6	(32) Separation Anxiety /Parents
13	52.4	(24) Aggressive Behavior
14	45.5	(21) Fear of Being Alone
14	45.5	(22) Tendency to Cry

TABLE 2
The ten most Frequently Named Causes

Ranking	% of Vpn	Item number and name
1	70.6	(09) Family problems
2	70.5	(12) Overprotective Upbringing
3	65.9	(03) Parents do not spend enough time with child
4	61.4	(16) Tensions between the parents
4	61.4	(11) Child´´s strong desire to get what he/she wants
6	56.8	(17) Self-neglect
7	52.3	(15) Inner inhibitions in the child
8	50.0	(01) Transmission of parental nervousness
8	50.0	(02) Lack of self-control in child
10	47.0	(18) Characteristics inherited from the father´s family

TABLE 3
Correlations of the Resulting Dimensions for the Behavior with those for the Cause Questionnaire

	Behavior FI	**Behavior FII**	**Behavior FIII**
Cause F1	.1767	.0611	**.4570***
	p=.126	p=.347	p=.001
Cause FII	.1176	.0056	**.2848***
	p=.223	p=.486	p=.030
Cause FIII	.0128	**.6755****	-.0907
	p=.467	p=.000	p=.279
Cause FIV	**-.3168***	-.0591	**.3679****
	p=.0128	p=.352	p=.007

*=p<.05, **=p>.01

Behavior *FI: "Socially undesirable behavior of the child"*

Behavior *FII: "Difficulties in achievement"*

Behavior *FIII: "Passive and withdrawn behavior of the child"*

Cause *FI: "Problems within the family"*

Cause *FII: "Physical illness and social conditions"*

Cause*FIII: "Negative characteristics of the child"*

Cause*FIV: "Unstable psychological constitution of the child"*

The results show that each of the four factors for the cause questionnaire correlates with at least one of the factors for the behavior questionnaire.